

The approximate number and size of the sections of each class vary as follows, all the frontages being 33 feet:—

			Depth in Feet.					Total.
			49½	66	82½	99	132	
First class	...	...	...	7	8	45	21	81
Second class	...	...	10	3	58	...	32	103
Third class	...	...	5	...	...	40	7	52
			15	10	66	85	60	236

From the foregoing particulars it will be seen that the position of the petitioners, as compared with what it was during the seven years, from 1865 to 1872 inclusive, when they were simply business license section-holders under Gold Fields Regulations, and liable to £5 a year per section, irrespective of locality, is, that their subsequent tenure has virtually resulted in a twenty-five and a half years' tenancy, the first four and a half years of which were at nominal rents, and during which a considerable speculative traffic was carried on by them in their sections on a doubtful title at prices ranging from £20 to £150 for the goodwill of a section. For two years, 1873 and 1874, they had only to pay a rent of £1 per section. For two and a half years—1875, 1876, and half of 1877—only £2 10s. per section, and since 1st July, 1877, they have got twenty-one years' leases at average yearly rents, according to eligibility of site—for first-class, £7 11s.; second, £3 15s. 6d.; third, £1 8s. 10d., or a general average rent all round per section of £4 5s. 2d. on a tenure of much easier conditions than they would get from any private landlord. When, however, they seek to have their rents reduced to a sum equal to the value of the land at the time they settled upon it, they cut the ground from under their own argument, from whatever point of view it may be taken, whether they mean during the time between 1865 and 1872 or between 1872 and 1874.

In the first case, with regard to the value of the portion of the reserve which was held under gold fields tenure from 1865 to 1872 inclusive, it was proved before the Royal Commission in 1875 that the goodwill of business license sections, merely of the ground irrespective of buildings, sold for large sums, a fair average of which would be £80. If therefore 10 per cent. interest on this sum—and it would be the minimum in the district during the period in question—were to represent a rent, we would have £8 in addition to the business license fee of £5; in all a rent of £13 per annum per section.

In the second case, between 1872 and 1874, when it was quite an uncertainty what the tenure and terms might be (certainly not longer than fourteen years at that time), at an average rent of £3 per section, irrespective of site, the traffic in the sections (only the ground) averaged a similar amount, say £80, which, at 10 per cent. added to the £3 as above, would be equal to a total rent of £11 per annum per section.

Since 1875 until lately there has been very little traffic in the sections, but latterly several dealings in them have taken place owing to the progressive increase of trade for some time past consequent on the development of the coal mines, more particularly in the district.

As regards the alternative request of the petitioners to be allowed to purchase the fee-simple of the land, I have only to reiterate the substance of my evidence on that point before the Committee of last year when dealing with a similar petition: (1.) That the Colliery Reserve was set apart for the special purposes of a railway depôt and wharves for an extensive coal trade, which may probably become the largest in the Southern hemisphere, and the requirements of which may in time absorb all the land so set apart, and more. (2.) That the Government have already expended over £210,000 on the railway and harbour works, which has not only materially fostered the trade of the place, but, through the necessary construction of the harbour works, a substantial barrier to further inundations of the town has been raised. Besides, the coal-mining companies in the vicinity have also spent over £60,000 within the last few years. All of which circumstances, combined with the prospect of further large expenditure on the development of the coal mines, and also the harbour works, have converted what would have otherwise dwindled down to a miserable and deserted digging township into a settled place of trade, and consequently have enhanced the material value of the land on which it stands, and also that of the surrounding country. (3.) That the Government have already paid close on £4,000 to certain tenants on the reserve for their interests in sections and buildings, which had to be taken for railway purposes. (4.) That it is misleading of the petitioners to imply that there is any analogy between the circumstances of this reserve and the lands of other townships on the gold fields. They were not valuable reserves set apart for an important colonial purpose, and vested in the Crown as security for the expenditure on that purpose, and consequently there could be no good reason against selling the freeholds on them, but the contingency may soon arise when more of the Colliery Reserve may be required for the purpose to which it was originally dedicated; and I need not say that the compensation which would have to be paid for any freehold which might be taken would be much higher than if the matter rests as it is.

In clause 13 of the petition there is the allegation "that some of the petitioners were awarded sections in lieu of those destroyed by sea and floods, and signed agreements to take out leases for the same, but they find that many of these allotted sections are of no real value, yet the Crown is enforcing by action at law the rents agreed to be paid, thus turning what was offered as a measure of compensation into an additional burden and loss," which Mr. Munro amplifies in his evidence to the effect "that the people who have got sections in the bush, which they can never occupy, are being forced to